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Kupferberg, Feiwei

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DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING  
AALBORG UNIVERSITY  
FIBIGERSTRAEDE 2  
DK 9220 AALBORG Ø  
DENMARK

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## **Ethno-nationalism, Liberal Democracy and the Psychology of the Post Cold War Era**

by

**Feiwei Kupferberg**

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TEL. +45 98 15 85 22  
FAX. +45 98 15 32 98

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## **Abstract**

Ethno-nationalism is usually seen as the enemy of liberal democracy. This assumption is questioned in the following article, which argues that the relation between the two is much more complex than usually assumed. In order to understand how they interact, the role of ethno-nationalism in the New World Order has to be demythologized and seen in the broader context of the psychology of the Post Cold War era, the reattachment of previous fears and anxieties, the misreading of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the depressing reemergence of repressed memories from the Second World War and the shock of reality as liberal democracy failed to address substantial existential issues in the wake of the collapse of communism. The chance for liberal democracy is seen in the need for an emotional grounding of a basically utilitarian philosophy and learning the virtues of liberal democracy.



## **The Social Psychology of the Post Cold War Era**

What was the Cold War actually like? There is a tendency today to forget how bad it actually was. As the memories of the tensions and suspensions in face of the very real possibility of a nuclear holocaust dies away, there is a tendency to banalize the evil of the threat of mutual destruction. The latter buried itself deep into the psyche of the post war generations growing up in this mad political atmosphere, invented by old men who had seen the destructions of conventional war and were soon going to die anyway so what was all this fuzz about. I remember my father used to say that there probably was not going to be a war, "they" were both scared of each others because they knew what war was and they knew the other had nuclear weapons, and in a way his predictions turned out to be correct.

My father had seen war at close hand and what it does to people, his family had perished under Hitler, he had been in Moscow when Russia was invaded, he had in other words lived on the brink of destruction while his privileged son had grown up in peaceful post-war Sweden and had been scared to death by the mere thought of a large-scale confrontation between the Super Powers which could destroy the world several times over again, just by pushing a small knob.

Now scaring the wits out of your children and grand-children, just so that they might hopefully live in peace is, no matter how you look at it, an evil thing to do and it certainly doesn't help to bring about psychologically healthy individuals. These parents were not precisely psychologically healthy persons either, they are hereby excused, but this doesn't make the moral crime less. I dare not even think of what would have happen, had the self-restraint of these hardened old men failed them at the decisive moment and as they were only human beings after all, this very possibility could not be excluded. Now what can be worse than being at the mercy of something totally unpredictable? No wonder some said "better Red than Dead".

This latter reaction was part of the evil too. Although we tend to forget it today, the very madness of the possibility of mutual destruction had the unintended effect of destroying the moral fabric of Western societies, which increasingly began questioning the core values of their own societies, such as liberty, democracy, the rule of the law etc. I am not at all sure that these values would have survived well into the twentieth century, were it not for the sudden collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, which had the immediate effect of strongly reaffirming Western beliefs into its own civilization. In some curious way it was easier for the Eastern Europeans to look through the cards of the communist rulers and see that they were bluffing. Living under a system which by its very nature makes individuals dependent upon the smallest whim of the ruler had the peculiar longterm effect of the erosion of everyday respect for the totalitarian system of power.

The Cold War, although led by individuals elected democratically in Western societies, was basically ruled by the totalitarian principle of uncontrolled power, as predicted by George Orwell in 1984, the perhaps most accurate description of the psychology of totalitarian power and the psychology of the Cold War.

It would be wrong though to assume that such fears and their deep impact upon the collective psyche can disappear from one day to another. On the contrary, what happens is rather that these very real fears, as they suddenly loose their "object" tend to look for a new visible political global reality to attach themselves to. Fears and mental distortions which have been with us so long do not disappear overnight but rather clothe themselves in new appearances. This is where the cry for international intervention against the new "enemy", called "ethno-nationalism" comes in. Its sudden emergence in the wake of the Cold War, particularly in those areas towards which our previous fears were projected, the seeming inability to bring such ethno-nationalist conflicts under control, their rather mezzy and unlogical character, their evidently absurd features, the elements of shamelessness and political propaganda, the fact that it was often the previous communist rulers who disguised their quest for power behind ethno-nationalist rethorics etc. has had the paradoxical effect of reawakening previous fears that were on the verge of disappearing or at least tended to "cool" themselves out.

## **The Misreading of Yugoslavia**

The passing of the Cold War had been going on for some years when the communist regimes in Eastern Europe suddenly imploded. The Wall fell, Germany was reunited and the Soviet Empire cracked up as its most precious jewel was suddenly and unexpectedly stolen out of its hands. The relief was tremendous, but no sooner had the West began to get used to the idea of a "new World Order", when a lot of unexpected things happened which made the new world look the opposite of order. Irak invaded Kuwait, civil wars broke ut in the Caucasus Region, there were rising ethnic tensions all over Eastern Europe, in Somalia ethnic war-lords were destroying the country and its citizens, in Rwanda one tribe, the Hutus, committed genocide upon the other, the Tutsis etc.

But the most depressing thing of all was the collapse of Yugoslavia, which made Europe itself into the scene of a type of conflict which reminded many of a previous war which had already been fought and done with, a war with clear ethno-nationalist traits, the Second World War. Thus arose the curious theory that this was a war "rooted" in ancient tribal fears and anxieties, a war which "repeated" itself as it was plainly patterned on previous,

long ago outworn models. The propagandistic reawakening of old myths for the sake of whipping up ethno-nationalist hatred in the former Yugoslavia had the unintended effect of reawakening other slumbering memories among Western democracies, creating a new popular myth, the myth of a revival of ancient, "tribal" hatreds in the midst of Europe.

It was a very convenient way of thinking, because it absolved the Western actors of any suspicions of complicity in bringing about the war in the former Yugoslavia through untimely meddling in a complex situation which should have been resolved by the parties themselves. In stead of helping to manage the conflict, the mobilization of international actors, working for a "good cause" but with little understanding of the motives of the parties and the effect of their very presence, only made things worse (Newhouse, 1993). It is amazing to see how a naive public opinion, demanding of their political leaders to "do something" actually pushed international organizations into a position where they couldn't help but become tools of manipulation. The increased presence of peace-keeping forces and peace-making diplomats were not used by the struggling parties for the purpose of enhancing the peace-process, but on the contrary, to prolong the war by seeking to mobilize international support for ones own territorial demands and thus not having to make unpopular decisions.<sup>1</sup>

But where did the idea of the war in former Yugoslavia as a reawakening of ancient struggles (Glenny, 1992, Yoffe, 1992, Kennan, 1993) come from in the first place? It certainly goes against the grain of everything we know of how ethno-nationalist conflicts emerge. Ethno-nationalism is never a "spontaneous" phenomenon. Although it is no doubt founded on a deeper, anthropological and existential need of "belonging", one can identify with many national communities. Why this one rather than the other and why emphasize this myth rather than that? Yugoslavia under Tito also had its founding myths, related to Titos role as leader of the partisan struggle, a myth which was actively promoted and dominated the minds of the Yugoslavians even after Tito's death. It was only when this founding myth was increasingly being rejected that the idea of a Yugoslav nationstate began to crumble. The latter was particularly the case among the Serbs, who so to say reinvented its own ethno-national identity by a selective appropriation of quite a different part of Seribian history which made the Serbs look like victims rather the the strongest party in Yugoslavia. Thus the integrating experiences of fighting against a common enemy during the Second World War was replaced by its opposite, disturbing the balance achieved through the earlier myth.

The death knell of the Yugoslav national identity or "imagined community" came

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<sup>1</sup> A similar mechanism can be seen in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which dragged own for decades not in spite of international intervention, but because of it. As long as one of the parties, believed he had something to gain by international intervention, this was seen as welcome. It was only when it became clear for both the parties that this was no longer the case, that they had to talk to each other rather than asking for sympathy from the world, that peace finally got a chance (Elon, 1993, Bar-Siman-Tow, 1994,).

with the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe which so to say eliminated its future grounds of existence. With no Cold War around, there was no need for a special "Third Way" between capitalism and communism and thus the "ideological" nature of the Yugoslav state was revealed (Kupferberg, 1994).

In this process, living actors and particularly post-communist elites were extremely active in redefining their respective ethno-nationalist identities away from one based upon citizenship in a communist state (Brown, 1992, Miller, 1992, Schöpflin, 1993) to the point where the break-up of Yugoslavia began to look as something consciously and deliberately created by intellectuals and political elites as assumed by part of the literature on ethno-nationalism (Brass, 1991, Sampson, 1992). Economic deprivation in the wake of the collapse of centralized command structures probably also played an important role in the Yugoslav case (Shierup, 1991, Wiberg, 1993) as did the fact that the dissolution of central authority raised legitimate fears of citizenship rights among ethno-nationalities in a region where state borders did not coincide with residence of ethno-national groups (Devetak, 1991, Glynn, 1994).

All these elements increased the basic existential anxieties of ethno-national groups suddenly deprived of the Yugoslav national identity which had been around and regarded as a "protective shield" and point of identification for all "Yugoslavs". Very few seemed to be aware of the "artificial" and highly "vulnerable" nature of Yugoslav identity. Croats, Slovenians, Muslims and Serbs alike basked in the glory of the elevated position of Yugoslavia in a world order, asking for "neutral" actors which could function as "mediators" between the blocks and which at the same time, much more distinctly than say Sweden which was after all firmly inside the Western liberal democratic order, stood for an alternative organisation of society, neither socialist nor capitalist or both at the same time.

Many Yugoslavs took pride in the idea of Yugoslavian "uniqueness" in a world which seemed unable to bring itself together due to mere ideological reasons. This dilemma the Yugoslavs had long ago overcome by choosing their particular "mix" of plan and market, centralized control and decentralized "self-management". Everyone travelling in Yugoslavia at the time could feel this sense of pride, security and relaxation, as if nothing which happened "outside" Yugoslavia could in the least influence the country. How wrong they were, how wrong we were, how dangerous it can be to live on a world of convenient illusions.

The Yugoslavs were fully unprepared for the sudden collapse of the Cold War and unable to orient themselves in this new world which had no place for such a non-thing as a state hanging in the air. The inherent instability of such an ideologically constructed national identity can also be seen in other parts of post-communist Eastern Europe, the best case being the former GDR. The idea of an independent GDR disappeared within few weeks of the fall of the Wall, due to the shock of the majority when confronted with the splendour of West Germany which the East Germans were now allowed to see for the first time in their lives

(Stolpe, 1992).

In Yugoslavia the erosion of the idea of Yugoslavia evolved over several years, but once it had taken hold, it could no longer be stopped. The question of course is, why this had to lead to war (Drakulic, 1993, Bookman, 1994). The awkward fact is, it didn't. Yugoslavia was driven to war against its will, partly because it was so unprepared for its sudden collapse, partly because the political elites wanted it and partly because the crumbling Yugoslavian state wasn't allowed the time to negotiate a workable arrangement which could have defused the anxieties and fears. The Europeans saw the Yugoslav case as just another collapse of communist rule and lacked the patience for allowing a compromise solution to work itself out.<sup>2</sup>

But it this is the real background to the Yugoslav tragedy, why has the theory of a "nearly spontaneous burgeoning of ancient blood feuds" (Mueller, 1994b, p.11) tended to dominate the public explanation of what is happening in former Yugoslavia? This fatal "misreading" of events can only be explained if Yugoslavia is seen in the broader context of the sudden shift to a Post Cold War climate, for which the Western public was largely unprepared. When the ideological confrontation between communism and democracy ended, it did so after the military confrontation seemed to have come to an end. That is, a kind of emotional relaxation had already taken place. Although this was never clearly outspoken, the general consensus in the West was that a continuation of the ideological confrontation was the "price" the West had to pay for peace, a price it was more than willing to pay.

The sudden and unexpected collapse of communism did not bring immediate relief, on the contrary in the beginning it raised new fears of a renewed military confrontation. As long as some of the outstanding issues, the most important of which was what was going to happen in Germany, remained unsolved, the very future of Europe seemed to be at stake. It was only as the problem of German unification was finally sorted out throughout 1990 and, probably as a direct consequence of this, a failed coup in Moscow brought the Soviet Empire to an end, that the Cold War was finally over and done with.

This reawakening of fears and insecurities, reminding one of the very tense

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<sup>2</sup> Probably some kind of "consociationalist" (McGarry & O'Leary) solution would have been the proper one. In stead the Western powers pushed for a "federalist" one, ignoring the fact that large ethno-nationalist minorities lived outside their "home" territory and when this failed, supported "secession", which was even more disastrous in the given case. Consociationalist solutions have worked reasonably well in Belgium and Canada where the different population groups have "mixed" to the degree where a strict territorial solution is impracticable or impossible. In fact, there were clear consociationalist traits in the way the conflicts between ethno-nationalist groups in Yugoslavia were solved in Yugoslavia. The problem was that these consociationalist practices were not institutionalized, in stead they were purely dependent upon the arbitrary role of Tito. When he died, consociationalism died with him and no Western power bothered at the time to look into the issue and when they did, they had long ago forgotten how ethno-nationalist conflicts had been solved in the past.



atmosphere at the hights of the Cold War, when the World was on a brink of nuclear catastrophe, superimposed itself upon the reawakening of memories from a previous war, and made a cool diagnosis of what was wrong with Yugoslavia and what could be done to avoid a civil war impossible. Only those theories which confirmed the unstated assumption that the world was again out of control and that all the previous wars we had fought had so to say been in vain because now it was here again, stood a change to be broadly accepted in public.

## The Return of the Repressed

The war in Yugoslavia created a visible object upon which the collective Post Cold War psyche could project previous fears of a nuclear holocaust. Had ethno-nationalist conflicts limited themselves to the former Yugoslavia, this might at the end have contributed to a gradual release of fear, as the conflict would eventually have found one solution or another. The reason this didn't happen is that it turned out to be only one of many such conflicts; that it "dragged on", with no stable settlement in reasonable sight, only a long series of frustrated attempts, involving almost all the major global and European players; and last but not least, that the war itself particularly the elements of "ethnic cleansing" in front of a world, passively and helplessly watching and letting this happen, "reawakened" earlier, repressed memories of a previous war which had been fought a long time ago but which had never been coped with actively because that previous war had been immediately followed by the Cold War.

Now that the Cold War was over, these repressed memories longed to be released, which they also did, but under the circumstances such a release could only have a deeply depressing effect. Not only because these memories hadn't been adequately coped with earlier, but also due to the "timing" of their reappearance. That previous fears die away only to reappear under a new disguise is in itself enough to drive one into despair. In this case, the very cause for cautious optimism had been tied to the predominant role of the "human rights"-discourse, which exploded just before Communism collapsed and the Cold War suddenly disappeared. This almost "miraculous" coincidence certainly contributed to an exaggerated belief in the independent power of human rights agreements, which meant that any abuse and disabuse in this field was bound to create great disappointments.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although the question of "civil rights" had played some role in the highly complex political evolution which led to the implosion of the communist regimes, by establishing a normative framework in which actors working against one-party communist rule could legitimate their political actions (Leatherman, 1993), these civil rights were far from established yet in the political culture of the countries in question. It took a lot of personal courage to act in conviction with human rights principles

What one tended to forget was that human rights abuses had been massive and systematic throughout the early Cold War period, including Yugoslavia. Of course, most of these happened to occur in the late forties and the beginning of the fifties. The scale of comparison had been vastly diminished. Compared to the last years of Tito, Milosevicz can be made look like a vampire, which only means we have forgiven Tito all that he did to his real and imagined political enemies, in the light of his one big success, keeping Yugoslavia from falling apart. Which probably means that Milosevicz will be forgiven as well when stability and a measure of prosperity at long last enters the region and he will start assuming the benign features of any dictator with his worst times behind him (we could call this the "Pinocheteffect").

The return of the repressed, thus interestingly happens to coincide with a new kind of repression. By suddenly being reminded of all the "negative" lessons from the Second World of how not to treat enemies and having disattached previous fears related to the ideological conflict with totalitarian societies, projecting them onto the etno-national conflicts popping up everywhere, the full scale depression had to set in and what could better cure it than a leap into political romanticism of the "Golden Age"-type, which looks for salvation not in the future but in the past?

Just as the newly liberated slaves in the Southern states began asking themselves what exactly they had gained with their new-won freedom if it didn't even help them feed and host their families, there is an almost irresistible mood today, seeking to "upgrade" the previous "old World Order". At least one knew how that order functioned, there were certain "rules" that were obeyed by both parties, everyone was part of the game and could be disciplined or brought to order if necessary. Now everyone is at charge, which means no one takes orders anymore. At that time, there were two unchallenged leaders, policing the world and through a kind of tacit "Pax Americana" - "Pax Sovietica", kept their clients under control. This possibility is now lost and gone forever. Instead of order we have disorder, in stead of stability instability, in stead of predictability, inpredictability.

In the words of the previous director of the CIA, Robert Gates, the end of the Cold War has led to "a far more unstable, turbulent, unpredictable and violent world", a theme which is echoed by several of the most prominent American advisors and experts in the field of foreign policy and international security. According to Samuel Huntington, we are facing a period characterized by "cultural" rather than "ideological" wars (Huntington, 1993). Why

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(Schorlemmer, 1992). One also had to face the very realistic risk of full scale political repression or even worse, a "back lash" from reactionary political forces. The latter was a very real possibility throughout 1989 and didn't disappear until the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991. The recent crack down in Chechenia illustrates how far some of the new democracies still have to go in fully accepting the Western view of civil rights as something unviolable under any circumstances.

the latter should be more benign than the former is difficult to understand. After all it was the latter who led us to the brink of a nuclear confrontation and what can be worse than that?

According to Brzezinski (1993a) the world is "out of control", and will remain so until western societies succeed in restraining their consumer hedonism. "Cultural hedonism does not lend itself to an activist policy which contains commitment and also requires some measure of sacrifice" (Brzezinski, 1993b, p. 13). Brzezinski's observation, that Western societies have become more occupied with internal problems than before is correct but this is after all a natural reaction and Western societies no doubt do have great social problems which they had better attend to, if they want to protect the core of their value-system from the current attack of an economic rather than military enemy (Kennedy, 1993). Moreover, democratic countries have always been loath to send young men to war unless provided with good reasons. This has less to do with cultural hedonism and more with the natural preference of the democratic psyche to prefer peaceful solutions of conflicts rather than violent ones. The latter only comes in force as all alternatives are exhausted. On the other hand a decision to fight once the previous mistake is admitted (which is the strength of democracies, that they can allow themselves the luxury of learning from mistakes) tends to produce more than plenty of the self-sacrifice asked for.

A kind of "Cold War Nostalgia" has increasingly become a predominant part of the psychology of the Post Cold War era. If the most problematic aspect of the Cold War was the latent grass root "political hysteria" which tended to prop up everytime the ever-present fears of a nuclear holocaust was provided with a new hate object, i.e. the placement of Pershing II - missiles in Germany, the present nostalgia is even more problematic because it tempts the brightest minds of the intellectual security-foreign policy community to lose their heads.

## **The Shock of Reality**

John Mueller (1994a) argues that the present flow of "catastrophic" diagnoses of the Post Cold War is made possible through a complex rhetorical structure composed of different layers: 1) The simplification of the actual complexities and rivalries of the Cold War, ignoring the many and evident failures of conflict management 2) Ethnic and national hatreds have been presented as a new and surprising phenomenon, when it is in fact a perennial phenomenon which has always been with us and will remain so in the future. 3) There has been a kind of inflation in the definitions used, with the effect of magnifying the present threat and diminishing the former one 4) Our standards have been tacitly raised, making the present disorder look particularly chaotic and violent, when the simple truth is that disorder and



violence has always been part of the international scene and always will.

The world today is no less stable or violent than it has always been, the problem is rather that the end of the Cold War has forced us to confront the world as it really is, rather than how it should look like according to both the two predominant ideologies, liberalism and communism. Although these ideologies are different in many aspects, there are also some interesting similarities between them. Both are first of all ideologies, that is they are more concerned with normative prescriptions of what the world should look like and less with realistic attempts of understanding what the world is and can become. Both are molded in the secular belief of Enlightenment thinking, that whatever is wrong in the way societies are constructed, these wrongs can always be repaired. The world is perfectable, there are no limits to what we can achieve, once we set ourselves the goal to achieve it. Both basically reject the idea of the "dual" nature of man, that man is inherently evil as well as good and that any realistic construction of society must take into account that dual nature of humanity.

The main difference between the two ideologies is related to the question of political learning. The marxists believed they had discovered the "final" truth, they supposedly knew the "objective laws" of history and this gave them the right to rule without democratic consent. Political learning in a communist society was thus always onesided, the "masses" had to have their consciousness "raised" by the one political elite who happened to know the truth. Thus no mistakes could be allowed by this elite, as this would have undermined its legitimate pretension to lead the masses towards a brilliant future, which was in its essence already known to the knowledgeable elite, but to nobody else.

The liberals had no such ambitions, they openly declared that they didn't know what the future looked like, they also admitted that everyone, including the elites make mistakes. The important thing is not to avoid making mistakes, mistakes are inevitable, the important thing is to be able to learn from our mistakes. This difference in the view of political learning explains a) why communism could not allow democratic rules and b) why communist societies turned out to be less flexible than the liberal societies. The rigidity of communist rule slowed down or blocked innovations in science, technology and society and allowed the Western societies to prosper in freedom while the communist societies had to deny their citizens both freedom and prosperity. The longer this situation lasted, the more impossible it became to believe in the great promises of the communist rulers. As this bitter truth became more and more evident the system was unable to control the inner development of society, which tumbled into chaos and collapsed from within.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The precise dynamics of this implosion is still a point of conjecture. Some of the outstanding issues are the interrelation between a) "system" and "actors" (Merkel, 1994a, 1994b), b) "Exit" and "Voice" (Hirschman, 1993, Jopke, 1993), c) the socialist utopia and "really existing socialism" (Schabowsky, 1991, Reissig & Glaessner, 1991, Glaessner, 1992, Mathiopoulos, 1994).

Having gotten rid of one secular utopia, the post-communist countries were offered another, more realistic but nevertheless utopian view of what society is and can be, a utopia which certainly allows for a more throughgoing learning process, but which is nonetheless in the grips of a way of thinking which shies away from the "hardest" issues of life, such as the role of evil in human nature and society, the perfectibility of social constructs as well as the inherent instability, unpredictability and chaotic nature of social life. These issues had all been suppressed under the Grand Confrontation between capitalism and socialism, communism and democracy, but suddenly they popped up asking for an answer.

The end of the Cold War cannot be reduced to the "victory" of one ideology over another, it was also and fundamentally the end of "ideology" itself in the sense that individuals had to face "naked reality" as such. Previous more or less convenient assumptions, for instance that individuals were inherently good and that the "right" social circumstances would always bring forth the best of the individual was shattered under the sudden burden of freedom. It was not only a question of lack of preparedness for freedom, but that freedom itself seems to be able to bring forth both the worst and the best in us, just as war does. Socialism or capitalism, the human nature remains the same, inherently dual and no matter how we construct society, we will never get that "ideal" mix which we hope for.

This sudden shock of confrontation with reality itself, the recognition that democracy and free market economics was no panacea to the problems of human coexistence, the sudden realization that freedom also brought with it immense risks as well as responsibilities, that it also created new problems where these didn't exist earlier (the problem of how to invent new jobs for instance), that it made professional criminal activity both easier and more tempting (due to the relaxation of overall state control and the sudden accumulation of wealth and opulence) was disturbing and frustrating. It created new anxieties replacing old ones. But most of all the experience was disorienting, creating a crisis of meaning.

## Why ethno-nationalism?

The sudden appearance of ethno-nationalist movements and conflicts in post-communist Eastern Europe and elsewhere<sup>5</sup> was intellectually disturbing for the liberal societies of the West, for the basic reason that the sudden collapse of Communism confirmed and strengthened the beliefs in liberalism all over the world, particularly in Eastern Europe. Western societies, who had increasingly become sceptical of their own society, dropped most of their previous reservations not only in the sense that they stopped talking about socialism as a possible alternative, acknowledging the failure of this Grand experiment. They also tended to draw the wrong conclusion that liberal democracy was all there was to it, that a liberal democratic society was enough to solve all the problems of human kind, indeed that there are solutions to all social problems.

This is also the reason why the very phenomenon of ethno-nationalism was intellectually resisted. It just didn't make sense and especially not now, when liberal democracy was introduced around the world.

The phenomenon of "ethno-nationalism" has never been particularly popular among the intellectual classes, neither among radicals, nor among liberals (Judt, 1994). The former thought that stressing the role of ethnicity too much would undermine belief in class conflicts as the most fundamental, while liberals didn't like the idea of ethno-nationalism because it violated their belief in a single humanity, in harmony with itself. Although liberals tend to praise the value of individual differences, they don't particularly like collective differences. In particular they don't like collective differences which are inherently conflictual. This is why most research on "ethnicity" and "conflict" prefers to study what holds a given group or two together (Coser, 1969, Rapoport, 1988) and dislikes or ignores that part of the identity-formation of ethnic groups which are conflictual in nature.

Marxists love conflicts, but only if these can be categorized as class conflicts. Liberals love cooperation, especially between different ethno-nationalist communities. None of them like conflicts between ethno-nationalist groups. Due to my own strong liberal sympathies, I am not particularly fond of ethno-nationalist conflicts either. My point is rather to stress the

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<sup>5</sup> The role of ethnic factors in world politics is not a new phenomenon. If ethnicity and related problems (ethno-nationalism, secessionism, conflicting rights, minority rights etc.) was somewhat understudied in the past, this is hardly the case now (Glazer & Moynihan, 1965, Snyder, 1982, Smith, 1983, 88, Gellner, 1983, Brass, 1990, Hobsbawm, 1990, Anderson, 1991, Banton, 1992, Stanfield & Dennies, 1993, Durando, 1993). What we lack are serious efforts of trying to understand the conflictual nature of ethnic conflicts (Horowitz, 1985, Judt, 1994), how these conflicts or the regulation of them (de Silva, 1986, Breton, 1991, McGarry & O'Leary, 1993) define ethnic identities and or/produces further conflicts (Dencik, 1992) and why these regulations sometimes break down, forcing the conflicting parties to find new ways of ethnic co-existing.

inherently conflictual nature in a world where individuals tend to identify themselves with a particular ethno-national group (or a particular combination if we happen to be children of emigrants). It is an illusion to believe that we can uphold such an identity, without creating a kind of "distance" between the group we tend to identify with and other possible objects of identification.

Simmel (1955) has convincingly argued, that it is impossible to establish a stable national identity without a "negative" model or potential "enemy". The English wouldn't know who they are, if they didn't have the French and the Germans to compare themselves with, the Danes need the Swedes and the Germans to ridicule, the Italians need the French and the Austrians in order to define themselves etc. The greatest problem of the Germans is that they don't allow themselves the luxury of publicly admitting whom they dislike or don't identify with, which means that identityformation is so to say "privatized" and because of this it is also solved in a far more aggressive, less civilized manner. The Israelis can easily integrate Jews from all over the world, not because being Jewish in itself creates a strong national identity, but because the Israelis can freely and unashamedly hate the Palestinians and the Arabs.

National or ethno-national identity has come to replace religion as the answer to the most fundamental questions of life. Where religion coped with the problem of evil by imagining a coming day of Judgement where everyone would have to pay for his deeds, modern sensitivity doesn't believe in the idea of a punishing God. It wants God to be understanding and forgiving and doesn't want to fry in Hell because of a sudden weakness, which can never be repaired. Which means someone else has to take care of the problem of evil and all the other things a modern society can not fully cope with such as the inherent chaos and unpredictability of life, inevitable personal failures and disappointments, the fact that we live in a "risk society" etc.

Since none of the political ideologies can adequately cope with these questions and since religion has changed to the degree where it is powerless against evil and the anxieties and fears of life, national or ethno-national identities are the only ones that remain (save art or science or wealth which can only be the religion of small, privileged minorities).

## **The Limits of Utilitarianism**

Gellner in his inspired book-length essay on nationalism (Gellner, 1983) denies this to be the case, arguing that purely utilitarian motives are at stake. Our dedication to a particular national community is explained by the slight advantage we get as individuals by having been through the same educational system. National identity is thus reduced to a kind of "rational choice",

we opt for the nation which best furthers our professional career. The problem with this theory is that it doesn't explain why we should want to die for our country. This, as Benedict Anderson (1991) emphasizes, is the true mystery of national or ethno-national identity. Why should say a successful American doctor with a Jewish background suddenly chose to emigrate to Israel where patients pay far less and where he puts himself as well as his sons at great risk?

There is nothing "rational" in such a choice and it remains unexplainable unless one takes into consideration the following argument: If I or my flesh and blood are going to die, I would rather have that done for a country I truly identify with, not for a country which offers me and my sons the best career chances. Which brings us back to Durkheim's explanation of the religious impulse (Durkheim, 1965, Alexander, 1988). Religion for Durkheim had nothing with utilitarian reasoning to do. Moving into the religious sphere, means moving from the "profane" into the "sacred". The "sacred" according to Durkheim was not something rational but the feeling of belonging to a certain community, comprised not only of the present, but of the dead and the unborn as well.

This feeling is very aptly caught by James Joyce in one of the most lyrical passages of modernist prose, the ending lines of the short story "The Dead":

"It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead."

Joyce was an Irish nationalist, more or less driven to exile for professional reasons, as his career chances in his home land were poor indeed, but his heart and soul never left Ireland. The interesting thing though is that the feeling Joyce describes, although it happens to be attached to a particular place and a particular people, is of a universal kind. What he suggests is not that a universal commitment for humanity at large is impossible, but that it originates in a particular love for a particular part of humanity. If we lose that particular love, we also lose our ability to transcend that narrow feeling. Universalism is a religious feeling, but under modern conditions, that kind of religion can only sustain itself by attaching itself to a particular object.

Perhaps there is hope for liberal democracy yet, but not in the easy sense of abstract



commitments, which has no particular attachment and is only directed towards humanity at large. It is precisely these latter kind of commitments which in the end tend to turn out to be the most dangerous or the least effective.

## **Learning Democracy**

The end of the Cold War has increased the awareness of other, unsolved global problems, ethno-nationalist conflicts being one of them. In contrast with the ideologically motivated tensions between the "Socialist" and the "Capitalist" Bloc, held in check through a "hierarchical" kind of discipline radiating out from a "natural" centre and the threat of mutual destruction, ethno-nationalist conflicts in the post Cold War era have emerged in a world without natural centers, without hierarchies, without strong ideologies and without the Damocles Sword of a nuclear holocaust hanging over us. These changes are indisputable (Hoffman, 1992). But does this mean that we are now worse off than before? And most of all, does this mean that we stand helpless in front of these conflicts, that we don't know where to begin?

The rapid emergence of a host of "alarmist" diagnoses concerning the state of the New World Order, replacing the old one, far from confirming that things have gone from bad to worse, rather indicate a curious "continuity" with the past, that is an inability to appreciate that things have indeed changed. Such diagnoses were part and parcel of the Cold War climate. Their persistence, as the Cold War era has definitely passed, indicates a certain clinging to old beliefs and sentiments, rather than a serious attempt of new thinking, which takes the radical change of the World Order into account.

Moreover it ignores that ethno-nationalist conflicts can indeed be controlled. In fact all ethno-nationalist conflicts are controlled or regulated one way or another (McGarry & O'Leary, 1993). The real problem is how individuals and groups can learn to regulate such conflicts, which will always be there whether we like it or not, through the rules of liberal democracy.

The most important reason why ethno-nationalist conflicts have been so violent and "unruly" in Eastern Europe is not because of the nature of these conflicts in themselves, but the way they have been coped with. The Germans and the French are still two separate nations, as are the Germans and the English. The memories of what these nations have done to each other in the course of history have not been forgotten. The important thing is not to forget but how to cope with previous bad memories of each other. The English and the Germans and the French and the Germans have fought terrible, bitter wars and brought endless

destruction upon each other, much worse than what the Croats and the Serbs have done to each other. The Muslims in Bosnia have never as a nation been involved in a bitter war with either the Serbs or the Croats, which means they don't even have anything bad to remember, still they are killing and raping the other, in stead of solving their conflicts peacefully.

This plain observation suggest that the main problem is not ethno-nationalism, it is the lack of a political culture which enhances a peaceful way of solving conflicts. But in order to develop such a political culture, to acquire the democratic habits of trading with your enemy rather than killing him and solving territorial and other disputes by legal arbitration you must learn to trust your enemy and acquire the habit of listening to him, even if you happen not to agree with him. You must in other words accept that you might be mistaken and that your opponent might be right.

These are "liberal democratic" virtues, but they don't come automatically, they have to be learned. It took the French and the Germans almost a hundred years to begin to cooperate peacefully rather then solving their disputes by war. Of course it shouldn't take the former Yugoslavians that long. On the other hand, we must give them some time to acquire these habits of mind and it is not at all certain that learning these liberal democratic virtues means they first have to unlearn the ethno-nationalist ones. Perhaps it is because the Western nations have forgotten how they learned democracy, that they now try to impose false lessons upon the Eastern Europeans and elsewhere in the world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The lack of success of international intervention in Estonia and Latvia (Birkenbach, 1984), in the Caucasus region (Paye & Remacle,1994) and in Rwanda (De Wall, 1994, Furely,1994) and the reasonable success in Somalia might possibly be explained by the current prejudice among Western observers (who dominate these organizations) against ethno-nationalist feelings. These prejudices were certainly present in Somalia as well, but here the "peace"-keepers very wisely withdrew as soon as they understood that their further presence had become an obstacle for the "peace"-making that had suddenly become attractive for the parties themselves. Not because these had become less aware of their ethnic identities, but because they had learned from previous mistakes that killing your enemy doesn't increase your own security.

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